

County enhances its historical profile

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A big part of the county's present is being hailed as a major link to the country's past.

The Decatur County courthouse sits on a site recognized by the federal government's Department of Interior for its involvement in the National Underground Railroad. The strict criteria for inclusion was set by the National Parks Service.

"The process only took a month because of all the research and documents included with the application," Jeannie Dinius, special projects coordinator of the Dept. of Natural Resources (DNR) division of historic preservation and archeology.

The courthouse, built in 1874, sits where the previous courthouse housed the famous Luther Donnell trial of 1847.

"This trial was important to American history because it was the first to challenge the outcome of Prigg vs. Pennsylvania," Dinius said.

Luther Donnell was caught, and held in court, on October 2, 1847 helping slave Caroline and her four children escape to a better life via the Underground Railroad.

Prigg vs. Pennsylvania ruled that all laws regarding the recovery of slaves were unconstitutional.

However, when Donnell's defense moved to dismiss the charges citing Prigg vs. Pennsylvania, the motion was overruled and Donnell was found guilty. Donnell later appealed the Decatur County decision and the case was brought forth to the Indiana Supreme court in 1852. There, the guilty verdict was over-turned.

"Donnell's appeal set an example for the entire state about helping to free slaves," Dinius said. "I think it shows how he was really thinking about others instead of just himself."

Currently, a state marker application has been sent to Indianapolis for approval. When granted, the marker will be placed in the courthouse square describing events at the site more than 100 years ago.

"We are trying to show how places in Indiana held important, history-changing events," said Dinius referring back to the Southeast Indiana Trails to Freedom project where Decatur County is a part of a network of other Indiana Counties involved with the Underground Railroad.

We commended you on your dedication to this important aspect of our history and expect that you will join with us in continuing to exemplify the values expressed in the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act," a recent proclamation from Ernest Quintana Regional Director of the National Parks Service read. "Congratulations again on

your extraordinary site which we welcome into the Network. We wish you continued success."